

Automated Voting

By Bill Hobby

Texas has come a long way since the poll tax. Few states make it as easy to participate in the democratic process. We have a postcard registration process, a three-week-long early voting period--no questions asked--and a growing number of counties that allow you to vote while you do your weekly shopping.

One-third of voting Texans, over 2 million, took advantage of early voting. Many counties, like Travis, staffed polling places at grocery stores and shopping malls and added mobile locations in office complexes and other places where people congregate.

The University of Texas at Austin took convenience even further. When student elections were held in the spring, students voted with their touch-tone telephones, indicating that it would be at least technically possible someday for voters to select a president without leaving the comfort of their homes.

What is the impact on the political process, and what could we expect if we took the next technological step?

Like all things political, it's difficult to say. A report to the Texas Democratic Party by Harold Cook, director of early voting for the Unity '92 campaign, credits early voting with increasing the turnout by about 2 percent and with giving Democrats a 5 to 7 percent advantage over the 1988 presidential effort.

"If no Democratic program had existed to maximize early Democratic turnout, it is highly likely that, in addition to Guerrero, Benavides and Mauzy losses, Spector, Baird and Overstreet would not have prevailed," the report said.

(Lena Guerrero was an unsuccessful candidate for the Railroad Commission, Pete Benavides for the Court of Criminal Appeals and Oscar Mauzy for the Supreme Court. Ruth Spector and Charles Baird won seats on the Supreme Court while Morris Overstreet kept his seat on the Court of Criminal Appeals.)

Others, including Texas Monthly magazine, debate that assessment. There is no conclusive evidence to show that the people who voted early wouldn't have voted anyway on Election Day.

(As Cook says, you never get to hold the same election twice so it's difficult to determine with any degree of certainty.)

Despite the conventional wisdom that Democrats benefit from more accessibility, Republicans took command of early voting in 1988, since they started their television and Get-Out-The--Vote campaigns early enough to influence early voters. This year, Democrats simply used the same tactics to regain parity.

But it makes good sense, in the days of convenience, that we remove as many barriers as possible to people exercising the franchise.

Land Commissioner Garry Mauro, the godfather of retail voting, notes that voting has been "the only thing we do that is still very inconvenient."

"We can bank at the gas station. We can get our prescription filled and buy auto parts at the grocery store," he said. "But you had to go to the school, the church or the fire station to vote. Many people don't have children in school and not many go to church on Tuesday."

Regardless of the results, it's a significant gain in public policy to make it easier for people to vote, he added. Mauro started working for retail polling places in the summer of 1990, long before he agreed to head Bill Clinton's Texas campaign.

So why not go the extra step and let people vote over the telephone? We can get information on our bank accounts by TouchTone. Merchants check credit card accounts by passing the card through automated telephones. Automated Teller Machines use telephone-like keypads to check balances and dispense cash.

And this year UT-Austin students voted on more than 20 items using their TouchTone telephones. One advantage is speed--results can be counted in about 30 minutes by a main frame computer.

But the concern at the university was the same expressed by many at the idea of telephone voting in state, local or national elections--fraud.

UT-Austin, which has used the system for several years to do student registration, gives students both an identification number and a personal identification number. But student government representatives worried about bloc voting--where a fraternity pledge might be ordered to punch in votes for all the members.

The solution, according to UT Associate Registrar Mike Allen, was to pass out special voter ID numbers at the polling stations. The irony was that those who went to the polling stations to pick up ID numbers, which were necessary to vote, could also have voted there.

Almost all voting today requires a personal sign-in which can be checked against the voter registration rolls. Voting fraud is a third-degree felony. A telephone eliminates the face-to-face sign-in.

"I think there is also a philosophical problem," said Rice University Political Scientist Bob Stein. "It's too much like a public opinion poll. The results could be extremely skewed. There should be some minimum amount of effort involved, some investment of time, in voting."

There are other problems: busy signals; a big investment in hardware and software; and areas without TouchTone service. But if early voting and retail voting are here to stay, telephone voting may not be far behind.

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